

Loss of Expeditionary Nature Within the Marine Corps

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The Marine Corps must not sacrifice its expeditionary capability by acquiring larger combat vehicles, establishing costly, long-term forward operating bases, and depending on contracted support. Expeditionary operations have been the unique capability which separates the Marine Corps from the United State's sister services, a source of pride for Marines. Having prided ourselves in this unique ability throughout the history of the Marine Corps, we have strayed from it in the past years. This has been identified by our Commandant with his vision for our future. The Marine Corps historical ability to rapidly deploy throughout the world has secured a place for the Marine Corps in the defense of our nation's interests. Current sustained operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan have taken their toll on this unique capability. Some would argue that the Marine Corps are modeling themselves after a more conventional ground force.

MRAP

To counteract the new threat of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the Marine Corps first purchased up-armored kits for both the High Mobility Multi-Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV) and the Medium

Tactical Vehicle Replacement (MTVR) which was a quick fix until the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle production came online. Neither the HMMWVs nor MTVRs were designed or upgraded to accommodate the increased weight of the armor kits resulting in excessive wear and higher maintenance costs.

The MRAP's V-shaped hull design and increased armor provide substantially greater protection and are better suited to absorb and deflect explosive blasts. Although a solution to IEDs, its introduction was accompanied by its fair share of issues. Additional bolt-on armor has created a substantially heavier vehicle that is new to an already taxed repair part supply system. Not only are the repair parts difficult to obtain in the current supply system, but Marine mechanics have not been sufficiently trained in the maintenance of these new vehicles. Unlike the MTVR or the HMMWV, the MRAP is considerably different with respects to new mechanical/part components as well as requiring a larger footprint aboard naval shipping.

With some vehicles in the MRAP family weighing in at over 22 tons, it is difficult to transport it via air. In addition, the MRAP family of vehicles gets less than three miles per gallon with limited off road capability (Crawley, 2007). While speaking to a group of Marines in Kabul, the

Commandant praised the vehicle for survivability in accidents and IED blasts but also noted that it was not expeditionary. The U.S. Army and the Marine Corps have just completed their combined initial purchase of 15,000 of the heavy vehicles. Currently, the Marine Corps is taking the lead on acquiring a lighter version of the MRAP, aptly dubbed the MRAP light, according to Emelie Rutherford (2008, p.240). This new version will not only be considerably lighter but will also have increased mobility. The MRAP only perpetuate the growing lack of the Marine Corps expeditionary capability.

Forward Operating Bases

Another trend since concluding combat operations associated with OPERATION IRAQ FREEDOM I (OIF I) has been the construction of and dependence upon forward operating bases known as FOBs. The majority of this construction has been associated with a select group of contractors providing support to American bases throughout Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kuwait at astronomical costs. One of the better known contractors, Kellogg, Brown, and Root (KBR) was awarded one third of a contract this past May along with two other organizations worth over \$150 billion to be

executed during the next ten years to maintain these FOBs despite having been accused of questionable accounting practices. Currently they employ more than 68,000 workers in these three regions (Risen, 2008, p.A.11).

Security is often the chief element that is sacrificed as host nation and third country national workers have access to our facilities. Even with their excessive costs, FOBs marginalize the importance of security resulting in unnecessary risk. Operating from FOBs fosters complacency which results in a dangerous false sense of security. This complacent and dependant mindset is further advanced by relying on host nation support in order to construct and operate FOBs.

The un-recoupable costs connected with firm bases will become a greater issue as troop levels are reduced in Iraq or as they are redeployed to Afghanistan. Subsequent redeployment of Marine forces will only reinforce cost issues as FOBs are vacated in Iraq only to become part of our operational landscape in Afghanistan as the transition materializes. Camp Fallujah was closed on November 14, 2008 with a planned handover to the Iraqi government. Minimal infrastructure will remain on one of the largest forward operating bases used by the Marine Corps. An unidentified officer was quoted, "If you ask me," stated

Kingsbury (2008), "I bet it'll be looted and everything worth taking will be carted away." The Marine Corps' continuing dependence on FOBs is not only costly but is detrimental to expeditionary operations.

Contracted Support

Not completely new to the Marine Corps or the military in general is reliance upon contracted support from civilian or other government agencies. The battle space of Iraq and Afghanistan is becoming increasingly technical with the introduction of new and ever-improving equipment. This is significantly increased when the United States is conducting sustained operations. These sustained operations are accompanied with a considerable increase in military spending prompting the military industrial complex to introduce new technologies and improvements to existing ones at a cyclic rate. These new technologies are far too often accompanied required contracted support as they outpace military school instruction for those required skill sets. What is a significant cause for concern is our lack of ability to function without them during forward deployed combat operations.

Improvements in existing and new technologies such as communications equipment and computers require a technical

expertise that is not resident with the existing ranks of the Marine Corps. Therefore, the growing contractor population more frequently forward deploys with Marine units in order to maintain and repair various combat systems and battlefield technology. In addition, many Marines leave active duty with critical skills for high paying contractor positions. Technical expertise has long been sought after for our nation's military and the void is routinely filled with non-military personnel working for the Department of Defense in one capacity or another.

The High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) is an example of such a system. Currently there is no formal schooling associated with the rocket system prompting on-the-job training from contractors. This limited training only permits minimal operational and maintenance capabilities organic to the Marine unit. Lockheed Martin was awarded a \$90 million dollar contract to provide Life Cycle Contractor Support (LCCS) to maintain rocket systems for the Marine Corps as well as the U.S. Army. Mark Syring, the director of After Market Enterprises at Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control remarked, "Our integrated approach to logistics support literally puts Lockheed Martin alongside the war fighter in the field" (Vanbebbber, 2008).

Aircraft and complex military hardware have relied upon these individuals for years. Contractor support has become a necessity for the Marine Corps, not to mention extremely profitable business for military contractors. Unfortunately, reliance on contracted support is becoming increasingly more common in the lower echelons within the Marine Corps prompting the loss of the traditional self sufficiency of the Marine Corps

Conclusion

Expeditionary capability has been a hallmark of the Marine Corps since first embarking aboard U.S. Naval vessels. According to the vision of the current Commandant of the Marine Corps, Marines must strive to regain some of its expeditionary nature. As General James T. Conway states in the forward of the Marine Corps Vision and Strategy for 2025, "Though our Corps has recently proven itself in 'sustained operations ashore,' future operations will place a premium on agile expeditionary forces, able to act with unprecedented speed and versatility in austere conditions against a wide range of adversaries." (P.3) Unless this vision is realized, the Marine Corps risks the danger of becoming just another ground army with an

overreliance upon heavy equipment, firm bases, and civilian contractor support. The Marine Corps has faced adversity throughout history in the form combat operations and at times, skepticism of their necessity as a separate department of the armed services. The Marines have triumphed over that adversity by continuously demonstrating their ability to be an expeditionary force of readiness. The Marine Corps must maintain that capability.

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